

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Eugene: Eugene Sweet. I was raised east of Upton, about 10, 11 miles, on a ranch. We were supposed to go to my aunt's and uncle's place for New Year's Day. We always went there for dinner and go visit my cousins. We always wanted to. That was our favorite place to go. My dad come in after he fed cattle and he said, "We're not going." "Well, why's that." "Well, there's a storm coming." It was still pretty nice. By, probably, noon it had really kicked in. It was getting right along.

Along about 2 or 3:00 in the afternoon, he went and took the storm door off. "How come you're doing that?" "Well, so we can get out of here; out of the house, because this door always drifts in." He brought the scoop shovel in. It's, probably, a good thing he did.

The next day he was out shoveling snow away from the windows because it was clear up on the first pane of the window, almost to the top. He was afraid it was going to crush them in and break them. Of course, the wind was a howling and a growling. It was probably 35 to 40 below, something on that order. Bad.

We didn't go. The next day there was drifts everywhere. You couldn't see from our house to the barn. It was just obscure. Us kids went out for just a little bit. We didn't dare go very far. You couldn't go, there was too much snow. We could jump off the barn. You could walk up on the drift and get on the barn and then, jump off in the snow and go right back up on the barn.

The car was; just a little patch of the roof sticking out. The tractor; the steering wheel and exhaust pipe was sticking out ... It just had a [inaudible 00:01:58] snowed under. [00:02:00] It was a big row crop [inaudible 00:02:02], so it was a pretty tall tractor.

You couldn't get around, hardly. It was beyond getting around. We didn't have snow shoes. I think, probably, Wednesday; it come around, maybe, Wednesday morning so you could see. Nobody had very good phone system. It was a rural phone and they tore it down. We didn't know how the neighbors were doing or my grandpa and grandma. My dad took care of their herd of cattle, too. I think he rode a horse down there. I'm not sure if that would be the case, but we, usually, had a set of work horses and regular saddle horses. He might of rode the horse team because he could ride the team. They didn't mind. He might took them.

He went down to see what he could do at my grandpa's place. The shed was plum full of snow. The cattle were out in front. Some people's cattle got suffocated in their sheds, but ours didn't; or his didn't. There was about 4 1/2

foot of snow in the shed and it was too high for him to even get in there. He had bought hay and had hay right there by that shed; some bales. He threw some of them over the fence to them; to get them some feed. Then, they went and shoveled down to get the cattle down to the water; down to my grandpa's house there where the hand dug water well was. I think the next morning that was drifted back in. It was about 100 yards of about 6 foot deep snow in there. Shoveled that down, so the cattle could get through it. We went and helped him several times, shovel snow.

I think school was closed for a week or so. [00:04:00]. My mom was a school teacher and she was pretty demanding about us going to school. The neighbor thought that he, probably, needed groceries and stuff. He took the front sleds, or runners out from under a hay rack; the front trucks or whatever you call them, and built him a box. He met us, probably, the next week sometime. Probably on a fair day, 15 above or something on that order. We met him down there and we took off for town and we had to shovel him through some places. You could skirt around on the ridges and stuff and stay out of the deep snow, but once in awhile we had to shovel him through. Them horses would stand there and wait for us to shovel. Then, we thought they could go, they'd go away. They didn't push us or step on us or nothing. Pretty good team. We got to school, it was after 4:00 in the afternoon. The rest of the kids were out of school. I don't remember if my grandpa come and got us. We were going to stay in town, we took our clothes and stuff, so we could stay in town. We stayed in town for 6 weeks.

My dad went ... There was supposed to be a Cat coming. He was doing the neighbors north of us up on the Crook County/Weston County line cleaning their haystacks out. He was coming up across short cut through. My dad walked over ... We could walk on top of the snow, then. It was crusted in. I don't know why it was. He walked over there. It was probably 40 below. Them old timers were tough. They wore their sheepskin and their felt boots and whatever, but they didn't have Carhartts and stuff like we have nowadays. He went over there and stood there in the trees, waiting for this Cat to show up. He got busy and couldn't come. Something happened, he had another something to do. [00:06:00] My dad got chilled down and he ... if he were like some guys, he'd, probably, give up and died right there. He done butterflies and he'd run and skip and beat his hands and ... Got the circulation going. He come back to the house and he was telling my mom about that, the last deal. She was just furious. She said, "I would have lost you if you'd been most guys."

The next day, they called with the Cat. They wouldn't come without knowing where to go. They were afraid it'd fall in a ravine or a ditch or a washout or some darn thing. Then, they would have no way to get themselves out. He went up there the next day and it was still probably 40 below. That day the Cat come. Then, he showed them where to go. Also, they wouldn't come unless you had

fuel; number 1 fuel or stove fuel for them. We had 1,000 gallon tank full. We had heating oil stoves so, our houses were pretty comfortable and we had plenty of fuel. He shortened us up a little on the fuel. He done both of us. It took him a day to do my grandpa's yard and the next day, I think, it blowed back full. Then, he come to our house and, I think, he worked the day there. Then, cleaned out some stack yards and whatever. That was half full the next day. It blowed and snowed everywhere. My dad said there was 8 major blizzards that went through, one right after the other.

Speaker 2: They really didn't predict the first one that came through.

Eugene: I don't know. We always listened to, I think, Denver was ... was KLZ, maybe, in Denver.

Speaker 2: KOA, I think.

Eugene: We listened to their weather. That was, probably, about the only thing that was around that we listened to. We had the old tube-type radios. [00:08:00] They had a big old battery. You didn't just listen to it for pleasure because the batteries didn't last very long. Those tubes took a lot of power.

Speaker 2: You said, also, from before that your dad was a keen observer of weather. He said he knew this storm was coming.

Eugene: He just had the feeling for it. Every day he would draw a little cartoon thing of the weather; a calendar with squares about yeah big and he'd draw him a little cartoon of the sun and the clouds and the sun peeking out one eye. How much moisture and how cold, how windy. Every day he done it. I wished I had them calendars for '49. I really do. My mom thrown them away the minute he was gone. She threw them away. I wished I had them. He watched the weather all the time. He had measuring cans all scattered around, so he could take an average. He didn't take just one or have a wheelbarrow and have it half full of water.

The National Guard had Cats. There was 3 rotary plows around Weston County. The National Guard had one. There was one from Yellowstone, and there was one from Estes Park, that come up. Then, the railroad had their big blowers on the tracks. Then, they had a big old rubber tired blade, or Cat I guess you would call it. It could go on highway and clear snow. The track outfits couldn't get on highway. They'd tear the highway up. I think there were 11 dozers, maybe, 3 patrols. They didn't do much with patrols. They'd do clean up work with them, but they'd get them stuck and they got to pull them back out with their v-plows on.

Speaker 2: This was the army?

Eugene: The army, National Guard. Yeah, was in and around and doing whatever. There [00:10:00] was flying box cars over our area. Flying in hay. I don't know whether they dropped any to our cattle or not. I don't think they needed to. I seen them kick hay out and I wondered why. Several days, they flew over. There was some guys that had their own airplanes that had skis on and they stopped at our place to see if we had ... Need medicine or somebody needed to go to a doctor. There was about 5, 6 pilots that had airplanes that had skis and would come and check. They couldn't land at the airport at Newcastle because it was snowed in. It was too much snow on the runways. They couldn't land there.

Speaker 2: Where did they land? The snow was packed [crosstalk 00:10:50].

Eugene: With the skis they could land them. They'd, actually come right up to your house almost. [inaudible 00:10:56] Piper Cubs with skis on. They could go about wherever. Good pilots, too.

The oil field was going south of Newcastle, so they had some pretty heavy equipment out there. Not like, nowadays, but, probably, V-7's and stuff like that. Oil fields all had locations and stuff they built and Cats and raiders and different kind of equipment out there. The only 4-wheel drive outfits were military surplus type stuff. Jeeps and some of the neighbors, even, had trucks that were army surplus. Our school bus was an army surplus commando car.

Speaker 2: The army, also, had these track vehicles, called Weasels.

Eugene: Yeah. Now, I didn't see any of them in our country. There surely was some around. Their train was stalled [00:12:00] west of Upton, I think, 11 days in a cut there. The last train was Sunday evening. Then, the first train was, like the 11th of January when the mail started coming back through a little bit. Their stores were out of products, like meat and normal stuff. Milk and eggs and stuff like that, they were out of them. Pretty bare pickings in the stores.

Speaker 2: Did your mom put up food?

Eugene: Yeah. My mom always ... She had a garden and she canned a lot of stuff. We never lacked for food. She was always pretty careful about having extra. She always had bought brown sugar and beans and peas, stuff that you could keep, flour and baking powder and all that kind of stuff. She always had that stuff in her pantry or for emergency type stuff. Maybe, run out of meat or something, but we could go have canned meat out of her canned stuff.

Speaker 2: In Upton, when the storm hit, people pulled together to help each other out?

Eugene: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. They helped each other tremendously. People that didn't have family, somebody stayed at their house. The kids that were stuck in town that were going to town school, that lived out on ranches, they'd open their house to them. They'd take care of them. They didn't have no kids or you wouldn't think they would. Yeah. We stayed at my grandma's house.

The streets in Upton were a one way street. The north and south street was one way street. There was snow drifts across the street that were, probably, almost [00:14:00] the size of the house on the west side of the street, clear across the street. It was one-way traffic up through there. Of course, they didn't shovel the sidewalks, so us kids would go up and down over the snow. Sometimes we walked in the street because it was easier. Cars had to stop and wait and we had to wait for them. Them drifts were there, way up in to May. It took a long time for them drifts. Our road out to the ranch where ... When we did start using our school bus, we would be off ... The road would drift in, so they would just cut off and go out in to sagebrush. Then, they'd cut back across the bar pit and they were muddy. It was like going to Africa to get home every night, when we finally did start using the school bus. I guess, about the 23rd or 4th or 5th, maybe, the 1st of March, we finally started riding the school bus back and forth. It was about 6 weeks of just ... It'd blow right back in.

Speaker 2: The shifting winds shifted the drifts around, too?

Eugene: The winds blew one way and, then, the other way and back and forth. It drifted one way, then, the other way and back and forth. The draws or any low spots were plum full of snow. There was still big old drifts in May in the bottom of the draws, where it drifted in there. Yeah.

Speaker 2: Tell me again about the screen door. I guess, it went outward?

Eugene: It pushed out. It went out.

Speaker 2: Start over again. Start with the screen door.

Eugene: My dad, he decided that he'd take the screen door off, or the storm door, because it opened outwards. It was our mud room, where we'd come in the entry way there. It would drift in, sometimes, tough to get it open, so he decided to take it off and stand it back, so we could get in and out [00:16:00] if it was that kind of a blizzard. And it was. It packed in there and he'd go shovel it out every so often.

Speaker 2: A lot of people talk about there's some bad storms in the '70's. Some blizzards and stuff, but you don't think that they measured up?

Eugene: They were 3 day storms and 4 days and 5 and whatever. This one was a month. It stopped the trains. It stopped the trucks that hauled in produce and all the groceries. All these little towns were just satellites. Whenever they went somewhere, it was a convoy. It went from Newcastle up in there ... There was a train load of hay coming, I don't know when that come, probably, about, I suppose, the middle of the next week. It come to Newcastle after the 11th. There was a whole train load of hay. Of course, then, the ranchers come to town and picked it up and then, it was a convoy to take it to their ranches out in the country. There was a convoy coming to town for people to get groceries and stuff, too. You turned right around and went right back.

Speaker 2: A convoy led by a dozer?

Eugene: A dozer or a patrol; big old rotary power. Yeah.

Speaker 2: What about cattle loss and wildlife loss?

Eugene: We didn't lose any cattle. We were in a timber and trees and they seemed to know where to go to get out of the wind. There's one rancher east of us, he went out on Lodgepole south of Newcastle and he'd run out there several years, his cattle were used to that area out there and I don't think he lost hardly any. His next door neighbor from the prairie decided he'd go down there and do the same thing. His cattle weren't used to that country and he lost like 100 head. Cattle are pretty smart. [00:18:00] If they've been there a year or two, they know where to go. I think, down in Weston County they, probably, lost 600 head of cattle. Some of them, probably, lost all but what was in the barn. A lot of them people didn't have 30 or 40 head. They were pretty small operators.

Speaker 2: I read accounts of barns starting to fill up with snow, too, because [crosstalk 00:18:26].

Eugene: Oh, yeah. Barns filled up, granaries got snow through a keyhole. A big old drift inside the granary right through the keyhole. You couldn't believe how much snow could go through a keyhole. Life magazine had some really good pictures of that kind of stuff. You've probably seen some them.

There was one guy that went down to Douglas to celebrate for the New Years. He borrowed 3 or 4 horses from his friends down there. He had a ranch south of Newcastle out on the Cheyenne River. He rode about 100 miles to come home on them 3 or 4 horses that he borrowed and made it to his place. I guess, he didn't lose too many cattle. To ride 100 miles when it's 35 or 40 below, is pretty ...

Speaker 2: That's rough.

Eugene: Yeah. It makes you wonder how they made it. I don't think there was any fatalities in Weston County from the blizzard, but there was 6 or so in Wyoming. I don't know just where they were.

Speaker 2: Anything else that you can think of? I'm looking over notes from last time. You're talking about trying to shovel out a train [crosstalk 00:19:48]

Eugene: Yeah. They had a train stuck in the snow west of Upton. There was a cut there right on the county line. I think, they shoveled and worked on it for 6 or 7 or 8 days [00:20:00] trying to get it out of there. They just filled the cut plum full with that train in there. They have to do it all by hand. Now, I don't know if they took a rotary and went up to the front of it and give them a place to start. I don't know. I wonder.

Speaker 2: What about after the storm. Did the roads really turn to gumbo?

Eugene: All the roads back then, there wasn't any gravel roads hardly. The country roads were almost all plain old dirt. Then, when snow started melting and when spring got there, it was mud every day for a month and a half. That old army outfit we had for a school bus had to plow its way through and plow its way back. It was a tough old bruiser. It was a long road trip, just 12 miles. [inaudible 00:20:56] rolling up. Then, some places would be dry, but a lot of places the road still had snow on because it had drifted in and they couldn't bust it out, so they would jump off the road and go out through the sagebrush. You're on the sagebrush and then, back on the road and then, off in the sagebrush and cutting across the old bar pit and mud. Half the road was off the road.

Speaker 2: Did you come across any frozen animals?

Eugene: NO. Not that I know of. I didn't. I don't think we had any in our area. There were ... Like south of Upton and south of Newcastle ... One of the guys said he could see dead cattle always. There was always one in sight from traveling back to his place after [inaudible 00:21:43]. There was dead cattle all the way out through there.

Speaker 2: They could, maybe, salvage the hides.

Eugene: They did. They come and skinned them. There was crews that come and skinned them and saved the hides. I didn't realize that, but I was reading that and I seen [00:22:00] that they done that. Yeah. That's about all they got.

Speaker 2: Same with sheep [crosstalk 00:22:07], too.

Eugene: Yeah. They done that with sheep, also. I forget how many sheep died in that storm down in Weston County. I seen what it was, but I don't remember now.

Speaker 2: I'm trying to see if there's anything else, Eugene.

Eugene: I'm trying to think of something. I don't know. I don't think people in town were as prepared as ranchers type people. People in town lived payday to payday. Buy groceries today and then, go buy some more tomorrow. We only went to town about once a week or every two weeks. We always bought staples and [inaudible 00:22:53] bread and all that kind of stuff.

Speaker 2: Ranchers were ...

Eugene: More prepared. Had to be. Yeah. I don't know when REA come through our country. I can't say exactly. I think about '50, maybe; '49 or '50. Maybe, that spring they come through. I don't know, but about then.

Speaker 2: I know what I wanted to ask you. I was talking to this guy in Lusk. He said that the static electricity was horrible in Lusk. Do you ...

Eugene: Lightening and stuff.

Speaker 2: Yeah. He says inside, even, stuff would be arcing.

Eugene: I don't know anything about that.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Eugene: I don't remember if there was any lightening during that storm or not.

Speaker 2: I heard of reports of it down towards Lusk.

Eugene: Sometimes there is.

Speaker 2: All depending on where you were.

Eugene: I wondered if, maybe, that's why the snow wasn't crusted like it was. That it might have rained a little bit after it ... Because we could walk on it. We could sleigh ride on it with a regular old sled. That is not ... You can't usually do that. You've got to have a packed road or something to sleigh on. We could sleigh ride [00:24:00] anywhere. Just take off on any hill and go.

Speaker 2: I think the winds were really packing it together tightly, too.

Eugene: Especially, moving it back and forth. I wonder about that.

Speaker 2: Somebody was telling me that you could ... They'd plow and then, they'd try to come back and plow it out again and it was more packed in.

Eugene: Oh, yeah. They'd just give up on it. The second time when it snowed back in and filled back in, it was just like concrete. They couldn't go through, so they'd jump off to the side with their blade and CATs and other ... I don't know how many times they cleared our road. Maybe, 3 times. Then, it would blow right back in. It was just like rock in there.

Speaker 2: There were, also, reports of people using dynamite.

Eugene: I've heard of that. Yeah. The rotary snowplows, they'd plow in to the back of a car. They fix the back end of a car or front end. You've seen that one snowplow that Maddie had down here that was from [inaudible 00:25:02] Crawford. It was just destroyed. He might have to take it back to the shop. It couldn't work no more, just bent all to heck. Rabbits. They'd hit a rabbit or an animal that was dead in the road, just like a rock.

Speaker 2: I've heard, also, hitting like antelope.

Eugene: Yeah. Antelope and deer and cattle once in awhile.

Speaker 2: Yeah. I guess the wildlife.

Eugene: I don't know. We didn't have a lot of wildlife down in our country. The coyotes were still, kind of. We didn't have very many deer. They got rid of the coyotes around '48 or 9. Those government trappers got all them and the deer, just lost them. Right now. So, I can't tell you about the wildlife.

Speaker 2: Well, then. I'm just looking to see ...

Eugene: My mind's blank. [00:26:00]

Speaker 2: Everything that we talked about last time, you've covered.

Eugene: I made a few notes. Let me look through mine.

Speaker 2: Okay. You said you had 3 feet of snow on the level.

Eugene: Yeah. Just about 3 foot of snow on the level. 2 1/2-3 foot. Just about everywhere it was level. Now, if there was ridges and hills, it'd blow off of the high and leave the tops of the ridges. You could see grass and stuff. I don't remember how

much we had to go around when we were going to ... Taking the horses to school. We had to surely gone around some places. It escapes me. We were crossing ... The ridges all went 180 degrees to us, or 90, I guess, you'd say. We were going down through the low spots. We've had to go around quite a few places.

Speaker 2: Were you having to shovel a lot.

Eugene: I shoveled some. Yeah. I always knew how to shovel.

Speaker 2: It never got in to your house, though?

Eugene: No.

Speaker 2: In to the attic or anything?

Eugene: No. It didn't do that. Our house was pretty well built, that way. It had insulation and everything in it. That's about all the stuff that I have.

Speaker 2: Okay.